

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

KEANE, WEBB. Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories

Wilenius, Heikki Juhani

2016-11-24

Wilenius , H J 2016 , ' KEANE, WEBB. Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories ' ,
Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society , vol. 41 , no. 2 , pp. 75-77 . <
<http://journal.fi/suomenantropologi/article/view/59644> >

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/235335>

cc_by_nc
publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

KEANE, WEBB. *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. 289. ISBN 978-0-691-16773-2 (hardcover).

Most of the research done in contemporary anthropology tends to be rather inward-looking; our debates have the habit of ignoring research done in neighbouring sciences. In contrast to this, Webb Keane's *Ethical Life* is a general treatise on what makes us ethical beings. Drawing from the findings and recent research done in cognitive science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history, it is a wide-ranging cross-disciplinary inquiry into our moral foundations.

The only study of ethics with a similar wide-ranging scope (that I am familiar with) is Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* (2012), which is a book about the evolutionary origins and cultural variance of our moral intuitions. However, while Haidt is conversant with anthropological studies of ethics, he sits firmly in a social psychological framework. In *Ethical Life*, Keane's approach is much more holistic and ambitious. Keane states right in the beginning that he does not hanker after a 'unified explanation of everything' (p. 5). Instead, he argues that ethics cannot be satisfactorily accounted for solely from natural or social perspectives, but instead we have to look at how the different approaches articulate.

The book is divided to three parts, roughly corresponding to Keane's three perspectives on ethical life. The first part, 'Natures', consists of an introduction and the first chapter. In the introduction, Keane discusses key concepts of the book and his take on the confusion surrounding the concepts of 'morality' and 'ethics' in anthropology. Following what looks like an emerging consensus in the field (e.g. Faubion 2011; Laidlaw 2014), his definition of ethics—'how one should live and what kind of

person one should be' (p. 20)—is derived from Bernard Williams' argument about the shared nature of ethics (Williams 1986). 'Morality' is a subset of ethics, where rules or systematicity in general are foregrounded, but Keane notes that this is not a distinction that always can be made (p. 20).

One of Keane's key terms in the introduction is reflexive awareness. In relation to this, he argues that ethics cannot be defined by rationality or self-consciousness, but when looking at what counts as ethical, an important part of it is the 'dynamics of reflexivity' (p. 26). For Keane, these ethical reflections emerge from social interaction, but in interaction with psychological and historical processes, or 'natural and social histories' (pp. 3–4), if you will.

If we want to adhere to a non-deterministic conception of ethics, in which freedom still plays a role, we need a concept that explains how these different levels of psychological and socio-historical processes come to have ethical significance. Keane's answer to this dilemma is what he calls 'ethical affordances'. Building on James J. Gibson's theory of affordances (1977), ethical affordances are 'any aspects of people's experiences and perceptions that they might draw on in the process of making ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not' (p. 27). So, for example, our innate capability for intention-seeking can be a source of ethical affordances.

In the first chapter, Keane summarizes the psychological research done on ethics, for example on empathy and altruism, reciprocity and intention-seeking. He argues that even though it is important to take into account the studies on moral emotions, they do not sum

up to something that we can call ‘ethics’ by themselves. The psychological perspective has to be complemented with a socio-historical account.

The second part, ‘Interactions’, starts with a chapter outlining research done on conversation analysis, and how that research points to the fact that the outcome of a conversation is always contingent, and it rests on an evaluative dynamic that draws on resources outside the immediate context of interaction. So, instead of the normative claim that ethics should be a study of freedom, which, for example, Laidlaw (2014) makes, Keane comes to a similar conclusion, on basis of empirical evidence. The undetermined and context-transcending features of interaction mean that interaction has emergent properties independent of our psychological dispositions.

The third chapter talks about how ethnographic evidence problematizes the psychological and sociological perspectives presented in the book so far. So, while a lot of interaction depends on widely-shared psychological properties, these properties, as ethical affordances, are elaborated or suppressed in various ways in different communities. For example, Keane discusses how the Sumbanese concept of *dewa* takes up Goffmanian face-work as an ethical affordance, and links it to spirit agency and other concepts to create a distinctive ethics of recognition and dignity. When somebody is perceived to have failed in a gift exchange, the person can be referred to as having a ‘hindered *dewa*’ (p. 115). A recipient of a generous exchange is considered to have a powerful *dewa*. The condition of a person’s *dewa* can be observed by others, and it also reacts to others’ actions. A weakened *dewa* can also be manipulated by ethical practice, for example, by sponsoring a feast.

The other ethnographic example discussed at length is the underplay of intention-seeking

(‘opacity doctrine’), and how this is a specific way to problematize ethical challenges in everyday life. For example, the Mopan Maya, studied by Eve Danziger (2006), do not make a distinction between a lie and an erroneous statement—a speaker’s intentions are not relevant when judging what people say. This does not mean that the Mopan are unable to make such a distinction. The point is that the practice of speaking contains a sacred morality for the Mopan. The connection of words and their signifiers overrides the intentions of their speakers.

The fourth chapter maps out the ways everyday interaction is linked to ethical reflection. According to Keane, systematic moralities rely on features of interaction, and the ethics of interaction draw from the rules outlined by morality systems. Here Keane analyses the interplay between interaction, moralities and ethical practice. He criticizes Jarrett Zigon’s idea of ‘moral breakdown’ (2007) as being too simplistic with its neat division of unreflective everyday life and reflexive moral crises. Ethics is not limited to moments of reflection, and moral awareness is more than solitary pondering of dilemmas. Ethical life is intersubjective, and often habitual. To argue this point, Keane leverages research from linguistic anthropology, especially on ‘voice’ (e.g. Hill 1995; Lempert 2012). The relation of a voice to its speaker varies, and the ethical positions these voices depict have differing relationships to their speakers. The evidence simply does not support the kind of model that Zigon proposes.

The third part of the book, ‘Histories’, introduces a social historical viewpoint to the analysis of ethics, discussing how morality systems and ethics emerge and change over time. His main examples in Chapter Five are the rise of the abolitionist movement in the 19th century and the technique of ‘consciousness-raising’

in the American feminism of 1960s and 70s. They are cases of what Foucault called 'problematization', a form of reflection that depends on our ability to self-distance. Self-distancing, an innate cognitive capacity that is further developed in social interaction, is an ethical affordance that can turn into a process of objectification.

Chapters Six and Seven look at how ethical change is effected and becomes stabilized, by examining piety movements in Papua New Guinea and Egypt, and Vietnamese communist revolutionaries. Keane's main point is that in some historical situations, people come to see themselves as having ethical and historical agency, and this is due to historical objects available as affordances to them.

The main argument in 'Ethical Life' is that ethics rest on three foundations: first-, second- and third-person perspectives. These can be grasped as linguistic forms: inner dialogue, conversation, and objectified language. They can also be understood as different kinds of affordances: psychological dispositions, conversational forms, and historical objects. Keane argues that a crucial feature of ethical life is a movement between these three perspectives, and none of the perspectives alone are sufficient for understanding ethical life.

To me, the most laudable aspect of 'Ethical Life' is the way it avoids the parochiality that at times troubles anthropological research on ethics. The argument of the book opens into psychology, cognitive science, and history, and is in dialogue with them, while still justifying anthropology as a necessary perspective to understand the variance in ethical practices. It will surely stimulate a lot of research on moral systems and ethical practice.

REFERENCES

- Danziger, Eve** 2006. The Thought that Counts: Interactional Consequences of Variation in Cultural Theories of Meaning. In N. Enfield and S. C. Levinson (eds.), *Roots of Human Sociality: Culture, Cognition and Interaction*. Oxford: Berg.
- Faubion, James D.** 2011. *An Anthropology of Ethics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gibson, James** 1977. The Theory of Affordances. In R. Shaw and J. Bransford (eds.), *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Haidt, Jonathan** 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hill, Jane H.** 1995. The Voices of Don Gabriel: Responsibility and Self in a Modern Mexican Narrative. In D. Tedlock (ed.), *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Laidlaw, James** 2014. *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lempert, M.** 2012. *Discipline and Debate: The Language of Violence in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Williams, Bernard** 1986. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Zigon, Jarrett** 2007. Moral Breakdown and the Ethical Demand: A Theoretical Framework for an Anthropology of Moralities. *Anthropological Theory* 7 (2): 131–150.

HEIKKI WILENIUS
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
heikki.wilenius@helsinki.fi